

# Christmas Customs and their Origin



The Famous Yule Log of England—A Custom which has survived for centuries from an old print



The Christmas Tree is of German Origin—Print of the 18th Century



Christmas Carol by Children in England—An Old English Custom—From an old Print

## How Our Christmas Customs Came About - Their Curious Mixture of Paganism and Religion.

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THE origin of Christmas and by whom it was celebrated is to a certain extent shrouded in mystery, and it is by no means certain that December the twenty-fifth is the correct anniversary of the nativity of Christ. This uncertainty is due to the fact that in the early days the celebration of birthdays was regarded as heathenish, but after the triumph of Christianity the prejudice died out and the date of the Saviour's birth became a matter of ecclesiastical investigation. It is recorded that Pope Julius had St. Cyril make strict inquiry as to the date, when it was learned that a number of varying days were kept in different sections. These included January the sixth, which was kept as a joint commemoration of the Nativity and Baptism of the Redeemer. March twenty-ninth, April twentieth, May twentieth and September twenty-ninth were respectively accepted in different places. Pope Julius finally decided on December the twenty-fifth as the correct date, and the first mention of its celebration as the birthday of Christ occurs in a Roman document known as the Philocalian Calendar, dating from the year 354. It is the opinion of several Church historians that this day was set apart because it was the date of the Winter solstice—the day on which for centuries before the Christian Era pagan Europe had held its chief festival.

Some of our present day Christmas customs are the evolution of a mixture of the Roman Saturnalia and Druid rites, with a smattering of ceremonies

practiced by the ancient Germans and Scandinavians—a strange medley of the Christian and pagan which go to make up the festivities of the modern Christmas.

### The Yule Log.

The Yule log, so famous in the English Christmas celebration, is of Scandinavian origin, and is the modern idea of the huge fire kindled at the feast of Juhl at the winter solstice in honor of their god Thor. In the days of feudal lords of England the ceremony of bringing in the huge, gnarled oak was carried out with great ceremony. Men went into the woods and hauled it in, singing carols as they dragged it through the wood. When they reached the entrance to the great hall a quartette of minstrels hailed it with music. Early the next morning it was lighted and if it burned well it was, and is still, regarded as an omen that prosperity will reign over the family during the coming year. In rural France and among the southern Slavs the Yule log is one of the solemn ceremonies of Christmas. In these countries, especially among the Slavs, the log is believed to possess the same magical properties as it did in the pagan days.

### Decorations With Evergreen.

The custom of decorating our houses and churches with evergreen at Christmas comes from the old Roman feasts, especially the Saturnalia, when all Roman houses were turned into "bowers of green"—another evidence of the anxiety of the Church to please their heathen converts by permitting

the harmless elements of the pagan feasts to become a part of the celebration of the Nativity. All sorts of trees and shrubs were used by the Romans but gradually it became the custom of Christians to use only the evergreen and to look upon it as the symbol of eternal life. Then these plants took on certain religious meanings until every branch of Christmas decoration has some significance peculiar to the day. The holly with its red berries is the modern Burning Bush, the Holy Mother and the Holy Child. This shrub is really an evolution in plant life from the wild myrtle, the only red berries of which will burn like candles—a sign that the Divine Fire shall spread over the world.

The laurel is the emblem of St. Joseph, and is often called St. Joseph's staff. The ivy is known as the Herb of St. John—a fitting touch to all Christmas decorations for John was the "Disciple whom Jesus loved." The different pines, cedars and spruce are green throughout the year—emblems of everlasting life.

### Mistletoe.

The mistletoe—that queer parasite plant so much used at Christmas, was the favorite decoration of the Druids at their winter solstice festival; in fact, it was held in a sort of veneration by that sect. History tells us how it was gathered with great ceremony, the white robed priests cutting the mistletoe from the great oaks with a golden scythe while hundreds of people, all clad in white garments, chanted. The people after obtaining sprigs of the plant from the priests hung the branches over the entrance of their houses as a propitiation and an offer of shelter to the sylvan deities during the season of frost and cold. In the

early days the mistletoe was tabooed as a church decoration on account of a custom which sprang up—that every young woman who came under the spray being kissed by a young man who happened to catch her there. The kissing became so general that the Church feared a return of the customs of the Saturnalia when riot and license ran loose. Early in the sixteenth century the use of mistletoe as a Christmas decoration was revived and soon came to be regarded emblematic of the mystery of Christ's birth on account of its springing into life from a branch and being nurtured by no parent stock. The custom of hanging mistletoe over the doorway or to the chandeliers, which often carries with it the osculatory privileges, is clearly a relic of paganism.

### The Christmas Tree.

The most widespread and most delightful of all festive institutions is the Christmas tree. While many countries have their legends claiming for them the honor of having given the Christmas tree to the world, the majority of authorities on the subject are of the opinion that Germany is responsible for this never ending joy to the child and that it is probably a remnant of the splendid dancing pageants of the Middle Ages. There is a pretty legend which ascribes its origin to Martin Luther and tells how after wandering about through a pine forest on Christmas eve he conceived the idea of setting up a pine tree in his home to represent the Tree of Life and decorating it with candles as an image of the starry heavens from which Christ came down. The first historical mention of the Christmas tree is found in the notes of a certain Strasburg citizen of unknown name,

written in the year 1605. "At Christmas," he writes, "they set up fir trees in the parlours at Strasburg and hang thereon roses cut out of many colored paper, apples, wafers and sweets."

However, in an account of Christmas customs written in 1737 by a German student, he speaks of the candles which illuminated the tree. Here again we must go back to the pagan days in Norway when the Yule candle was burned for the god Thor at the winter solstice. Later, when these people began to celebrate the Nativity the candles were burned as of old, but called the Candles of Purification. Quite recently there has been a revival of the Christmas candle custom, and today it is no uncommon sight to see the windows of houses lighted by them on Christmas night. The fashion of sending bayberry candles is in vogue, and this year thousands of these olive green candles will be sent out as gifts. They are made from a berry which grows on the Atlantic Coast from Massachusetts to the Carolinas and have a delicate odor, burning without making ridges of wax down the sides. A bayberry candle is said to protect its owner from all harm if it is lighted on Christmas. As the legend runs, its incense will be wafted through the air to friends in distant lands and thus their thoughts will turn to the far away owner of the Purification Candle.

### Carols.

Amid so many popular customs at Christmas there is none more charming than that of the Christmas carols which celebrate in joyous yet devout strains the Nativity of the Saviour. The word is derived from the Latin cantare—to sing, and rola—an ex-

clamation of joy. The practice appears to be as old as the celebration of Christmas itself as Church history shows records of how the bishops were accustomed to sing carols on Christmas Day, also that in the early days the shepherds left their flocks and came to Rome to sing and play on musical instruments before the shrines and churches. During the fifteenth century the carol was at the height of its popularity as just about that time a number of beautiful Christmas hymns were written. In Germany the people always went to the balconies or tops of the churches and chanted their carols—a custom still carried out in some of the smaller towns of Germany. In many countries the carol singing is done by children who go from house to house with a Christmas greeting.

### The Christmas Card.

The Christmas card is of comparatively recent origin and seems to be one of those new methods of remembering friends without going to very much trouble or expense to do so. The Christmas card is a legitimate descendant of what was known about 1830 as "Christmas pieces." They were sheets of writing paper on which elaborate drawings were made, sometimes headed by copper plate engravings, and used by school boys to show their parents the progress made in their chirography. About 1846 a London publisher put out a number of cards decorated with tiny colored wreaths of holly with the words "A Merry Christmas" engraved under the decoration. Hundreds were sold and the Christmas card sprang into use and has been steadily growing in favor ever since. It is a sort of attenuated present.

### Gifts and Feasting.

The giving of gifts originated in the days of ancient Rome when the citi-

zens offered gifts to each other during the January Kalends, but when the Feast of the Nativity was hallowed by the Church the giving of gifts was changed to Christmas as the appropriate time for sending presents, for did not the Three Wise Men bring gifts to the Child in the Manger, and was not this Child the gift of God to the human race?

Even Saint Nicholas, or Santa Claus as he is known in this country, has wandered away from his own feast day, December sixth, to please the children and help their parents to reward the good boys and girls of the land. He is the patron saint of the child and is supposed to bring sweets to the good children and rods for the bad ones. However, during the present age he seems to reward them all. His part in the Christmas festival originated in Holland several centuries ago, when he became a part of Christmas and it was the Dutch emigrant who brought him to the United States. The body of the real St. Nicholas rests in the magnificent church at Bari, Italy, and is a famous place of pilgrimage for children.

It was not strange that at that season when everyone was filled with good cheer and kindly feeling for others that the thoughts of those who had plenty should turn towards the poor and needy. Early in the days of these Christmas festivities the custom sprang up of sending gifts to those in want such gifts as would best minister to their necessities and happiness and make them feel that the true Christian spirit was abroad in the land and that the message of love and charity which Christ brought to mankind was not forgotten, and as far back as the tenth century Christmas dinners were provided for the poor—foreshadowing of the feasts given to the unfortunate today.



Trimming the Christmas Tree



Christmas Tree in the Trenches



A Christmas Tree in One of the German Trenches

## How the Men Who Are Fighting Spend Christmas, and How for a Time the Soldiers of the Warring Nations Forget That They Are Enemies.

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PEACE on earth, good will to men," is heard all over Christendom on Christmas morning, and the spirit of charity it teaches is not without its influence even among those who may seem to hate each other.

The Christmas of 1915 will find Europe as it did in 1914—an armed camp, the only difference between the days will be that millions of killed and wounded have been offered up as a sacrifice to the lust of power during the year and yet whatever bitterness and hatred there may be among those engaged in this terrible conflict, if there is any personal bitterness or hatred, will probably be forgotten and the day celebrated as it was last year by the men themselves declaring a truce and fraternizing with each other on the ground before the trenches. While much has been written of life in the underground dens where men have burrowed like rats into the earth to escape the guns of the enemy and yet be able to pick off this same enemy at will, these accounts show that there is little that is picturesque or romantic

about trench warfare. Last winter nerve racked men lived for days in muddy ditches wondering how much longer it would last—this awful laughter of men, this terrifying combat of long opposing lines of heavy artillery and howitzers, the shrieking or shell, the whistling of shrapnel and the tearing roar of guns, the savage efforts to take and retake trenches with always the slaughter of brave men.

### Gifts For Men in the Trenches.

When there is a lull in the fighting trench life is even worse than when there is firing, for the monotony of idleness so works upon their nerves that every bush or tree becomes an imaginary enemy, the cracking of a twig, the sighing of the wind or the moan of a sleeping soldier will set their nerves ajangle. "Cheer up, boys, Christmas will soon be here and we will have all sorts of good things!" cries out one of the men as he looks at his comrade's wan face, and the two begin to talk of the coming festival as the one bright spot in the

### trench fighter's life.

#### Germans Celebrate.

Those who are acquainted with the German people know that wherever a German happens to be at Christmas he will find some way to celebrate the festival, and the German soldier in the trench is no exception, for he is already gathering in the pine branches to decorate his underground quarters. Last year, although the weather was bitter, the men managed to bring Christmas cheer into the very theatre of war by actually setting up Christmas trees in the trenches and decorating them with bright colored bands and ribbons taken from the cigars and cigarettes which had been sent to them. Every scrap of colored paper that could be found was utilized, and according to a letter from a German soldier to his mother, one tree was decorated with paper chickens made from the colored papers that had been wrapped around the candy "kisses" sent from home. Boxes of German

cakes cut into grotesque figures of soldiers caused the men much merriment among the troops when they set the gingerbread men up in rows and then knocked them down with candies. Finally they made a feast of their targets. In many places the men managed to serve regular Christmas dinners where, to use the expression of a German who spoke English, "they made pleasant with addresses and conversation."

#### French and English Christmas.

Along the lines of the Allies the same scenes were enacted except there were fewer Christmas trees, the British and French contenting themselves by hanging branches of evergreen about the trenches. The Christmas box was in evidence as well as the fur coat, warm mittens, mufflers and sweaters. Down in the French trenches there were several Christmas vaudeville shows. It is a well known fact that hundreds of French players are fighting in the ranks of the French

### French Soldiers in the Trenches with their Christmas Box

army, and wherever they could be found on Christmas day they were pressed into service to do a "turn," and for a time the horrors of war were forgotten in the peals of laughter which resounded throughout the long ditch. "We had plenty to eat and a good time," wrote a Frenchman to his mother. "Your cake—well, I can't tell you how much we enjoyed it. One of the men from the old Moulin Rouge in Paris is in our regiment and he gave us a fine show. Two or three times he ran out of the trenches and waved his hat at the Germans but they did not shoot at him—in fact, they did not bother us at all. I expect they were celebrating just as we were."

clothing. Hundreds of cases of milk were sent by friends. An English dairy made a specialty of sending milk to the trenches for Christmas and one might send as few as half a dozen quart bottles, so even the poorest woman was able to send her son milk for Christmas.

#### Germans and English Fraternize.

At several points where the trenches of the Germans and English were not far apart the Germans began to talk peace and good will among themselves. "After all," they said, "our enemies are but fighting for the land they love as we are, and why should we not forget our differences and on this birthday of the Son of Man give greeting to our enemies?" This feeling brought about Christmas scenes on the battlefields of Europe which seem almost incredible. A number of English war correspondents witnessed the incidents and sent reports to their respective newspapers. After the Germans had trimmed their Christmas trees and set up lanterns they came out of their trenches bearing a flag of truce and invited the English to stop shooting and come over and celebrate Christmas. With one accord the invitation was accepted and a truce for the night arranged. Then officers and men from both sides left their trenches and met on "No Man's Land," where as a rule no man dares to show so much as the top of his head. It was decided that each side would first bury their dead, and while the English were engaged in

this sad duty a party of Germans brought over the body of an English officer who had been killed in front of their trenches and deposited it reverently on the ground before some of his regiment, after which they went back to attend to the burial of their own dead. When this last tribute to comrades was completed the Germans brought out cigars and cigarettes and men who a few hours before had been shooting at each other danced around arm in arm wishing each other the compliments of the season. They even made addresses to each other on the subject of Christmas which were interpreted by a young German soldier who had lived in the United States. This particular regiment was composed of Saxons—big, merry fellows who made the English laugh at their pranks. As the day wore on the soldiers joined in a rabbit hunt, and later there was a football match which was won by the Germans. After a while they exchanged hats and finally as a compliment to the Germans the English sang "Deutschland Uber Alles," and the Germans, not to be outdone, gave a rendition of "God Save the King." After it was all over the men of both sides declared that they were agreeably surprised to find their enemies such a decent lot of fellows. Toward night the men got back into the trenches, and early on the twenty-sixth the firing began again.

#### French and German Meet On Common Ground.

The French and Germans, too, exchanged Christmas greetings, but it was not as general as the festivities with the English. At one place where it is said that the trenches were only about eighty yards apart the Germans asked their French opponents to declare a truce on Christmas Eve to bury the dead. The French accepted, and came out of their trenches carrying shovels. The Germans went over the line offering cigars and cigarettes with the compliments of the season. At first the French feared a surprise, but after a French corporal had shaken hands with a big German there were salutes and good wishes. Then the dead were buried and the men returned to their trenches. "For a time all was silent," wrote one of the men, "then we began to try to kill each other again, and the man who offered the first box of cigars to a French soldier fell dead beside me—but, after all, it was a bit of Christmas."

During the coming holidays it is expected that these same scenes will be repeated, and it may be that in the meetings a little prayer for the ending of the carnage may be said and that ere long the Angel of Peace may spread her white wings over the men in the trenches and make the Christmas theme of "Peace on earth, good will to men" a full reality to all the world.